

Laughing Matters

BY AMELIA DAVID

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Feeling Festive

The torrential rains of April may leave you finding it hard to believe there's anything to feel festive about—but hang in there. May brings the start of the comedy festival season to NYC, as well as the return of a regular comedy talent search to one of our most venerable clubs.

Surf Reality recently announced its second-annual Surf Comedy Festival, "Le Surf 2000." *Surf* is one of the first and best known of the Lower East Side venues for "alternative" or "performance" comedy, and is gearing up for this annual festival (which it began last year) to celebrate the genre *Surf* supported throughout the 1990s. The festival's goal is to promote acts which are pushing the comic form in new directions. Such new forms have been taking shape in the lofts and storefronts of Manhattan's Lower East Side, combining storytelling, music, poetry, performance art, and jokes, while at the same time shattering the formulas for what comedy should be.

Surf feels there is a great over-saturation of traditional stand-up comedy in clubs, on television, and on radio, and that the current generation of comedians reinventing comedy to make it fresh, witty and surprising should be supported and celebrated. I've heard *Surf*'s proprietor, Robert Prichard, use the example, "How much great chocolate cake can you keep eating? Eventually you're going to want to try something else."

Now, do I always get what many of the performers featured there are going for? No. Do I think it's funny or worth celebrating every time? No. But I wholeheartedly support a venue that gives as much stage time to performers just starting out as *Surf Reality* does. It's really hard for a venue to even stay afloat when doing that (I know, having been a club booking manager); and these folks are in it to help the performers, not for the bucks. I have great respect for what Prichard does. I also know that a number of successful mainstream comics and performers have used *Surf*'s stage time during their early "alternative" period, or to work on what became highly acclaimed one-person shows that opened at other venues (and often got much more of the credit than *Surf* did). The place is always a happening truly like no other and very deserving of audience support.

The Surf Comedy Festival takes place over 13 nights, May 1-13, at several performance spaces in and around the Lower East Side of Manhattan, including *Surf Reality*, *Collective Unconscious*, and *Blue Stockings Bookstore*.

Among the diverse acts performing this year are: The **Irwin Smalls Trio**, Reverend **Jen Miller** (you may know her from The AntiSlam she hosts Wednesdays at *Collective Unconscious* in her role as "Patron Saint of the uncool," or from her ongoing stint as a spokesmodel for Tony and Tina Cosmetics), the outrageous rants and stories of **Rob Shapiro**, **Faceboy** (his Faceboyz Open Mike Night is held every Sunday at *Surf Reality*), and

Send correspondence for "Laughing Matters" to Amelia David, c/o Back Stage, 1515 Broadway, 14th fl., NYC 10036 or e-mail to lafsmatter@aol.com.

Grindhouse-A-Go-Go! The musical acts include **The Sacred Clowns Comedy Orchestra** and **Rob Paravonian**. (As well as appearing on Comedy Central's "Premium Blend" and the pilot for VH1's "Random Play," Parovian has written music for "Break Up Girl"'s stage show.) He will also be hosting one of the special-event theme nights during the festival.

At *Surf Reality* on Fri., May 12, there will be an evening of Chicago comedy featuring The Upright Citizens Brigade, Ectomorph, The Conspiracy Theatre Company, and many more. Other theme nights include May 1's "Surf Circus," May 2's "Feminist Comedy" and May 9's "Surf Stand-Up."

I've already been receiving early press releases for this year's June *Toyota Comedy Festival*. Comedy Central's "The Daily Show" host **Jon Stewart** recently broke everybody up at a press conference in a private room in Carnegie Hall to announce the 8th-annual fest, the largest of its kind. This year it will take place in New York from June 1 to 10. Among the events scheduled all over the city will be stand-up performances, the premiere of the movie "Advice from a Caterpillar" with **Andy Dick**, and on June 8 Jon Stewart's comedy show at Carnegie Hall. So far my favorite Toyota offering is going to be the "Man Candy" night at *Boston Comedy Club*, Tues., June 6, at 8 pm.

Hosted by **Paula Bel** ("The Tonight Show"), "Man Candy" features **DC Benny**, **Nick Dipoalo**, **Robert Kelly**, **Marc Maron**, and **Godfrey Danchimah**. Tasty comedy, indeed. Just so you'll know, the comedy powers that be for festivals don't always get me everyone's press releases. Now is not too early to be emailing me your info. (If you snail mail: Remember, it's still going to take time for the great staff at *Back Stage* to get me your flyers.)

I'm very excited to announce that **Rick Panson's Duplex** in the West Village is once again bringing back a new version of its regular talent search, now to be called "Stars of Tomorrow 2000." I had so many great experiences when I ran that program for the *Duplex*. Quite a long list of comics started there and have gone on to be very successful in clubs and on TV—and that's not just club hype; I know firsthand. Perhaps some of you will be part of the new crop.

Scott Barbarino (no stranger to comedy with his award-winning work leading the musical-comedy group The Bev-Naps) now helms the talent search, and I'll even be one of the judges for the first contest, May 1. I can't wait. The *Duplex* will be celebrating it's 50th anniversary this October, so now is a great time to be introducing yourself to this organization.

I see in my mailbox that comedienne **Maureen "MO" Langan** (formerly of Bloomberg TV and Radio) is now producing a comedy-and-variety night at the *Duplex* as well, on May 11 and 25, at 8 pm. I know Langan is always trying to find ways to give other comics stage time and I'm sure this show will have her usual sassy wit.

While he may play slacker dudes in a number of TV commercials, **Buddy Bolton** is no slacker when it

Continued on page 21

SEEING HAVEL

FEATURING

Pamela Graham Tommy Minnix
Richard Guido Max Kaiser
Marian Sarach* Jim Boerlin*
Eric Brooks Scott Sheldon
David Kampman*

Directed by Marian Sarach
Written by Vernon Church

The Greenwich Street Theater
547 Greenwich Street at Charlton
Admission: \$12.00

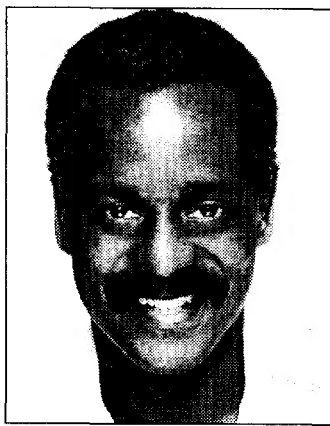
Preview:
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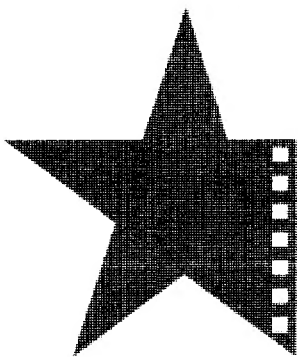
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Set Design (Play): David Gallo ("Jitney"); Derek McLane ("East Is East"); James Noone ("The Time of the Cuckoo"); Rob Odoroso ("An Empty Plate at the Café du Grand Boeuf"); Neil Patel ("Dinner with Friends"); Tony Walton ("Uncle Vanya").

Set Design (Musical): Julian Crouch, Graeme Gilmour ("Shockheaded Peter"); David Gallo ("The Wild Party") (MTC); Thomas Lynch ("Contact"); Thomas Lynch ("The Music Man"); Robin Wagner ("Kiss Me, Kate").

Costume Design: Jonathan Bixby, Gregory A. Gale ("The Country Club"); Boyd Graham ("The Big Bang"); William Ivey Long ("The Music Man"); Martin Pakledinaz ("Kiss Me, Kate"); Martin Pakledinaz ("The Wild Party") (MTC); Kevin Pollard ("Shockheaded Peter").

Lighting Design: Peter Kaczorowski ("Contact"); David Lander ("Dirty Blonde"); Brian MacDevitt ("An Experiment with an Air Pump"); Robert Perry ("The Water Engine");

Kenneth Posner ("The Wild Party") (MTC); Scott Zielinski ("Space").

Sound Design: Marc Gwinn ("Coyote on a Fence"); Jamie Mereness ("Charlie Victor Romeo"); Rob Milburn, Michael Bodeen ("Space"); Darron L. West ("Chesapeake"); Darron L. West ("Y2K").

Solo Performance: Spalding Gray ("Morning, Noon, and Night"); Olympia Dukakis ("Rose"); Barry Humphries ("Dame Edna—The Royal Tour"); Mark Linn-Baker ("Chesapeake"); Mark Setlock ("Fully Committed"); Marc Wolf ("Another American: Asking and Telling").

Unique Theatrical Experience: "Charlie Victor Romeo"; "Do You Come Here Often?"; "Shockheaded Peter."

Special Awards: Alexander Cohen for his lifelong commitment to excellence in theatre (posthumous); Barnard Hughes and Helen Stenborg (Shared Lifetime Achievement); the cast of "Jitney" (Outstanding Ensemble Performance). □

REVIEW • Theatre

Coyote on a Fence

Reviewed by Elias Stimac

Presented by Playwrights' Preview Productions/Urban Stages, at Blue Heron Arts Center, 123 E. 24th St., NYC, March 26-April 22.

Two men—cellmates on death row—learn about life, each other, and themselves in Bruce Graham's masterful work "Coyote on a Fence." In its New York premiere at Blue Heron Arts Center, the intermissionless drama is given a flawless production under the watchful direction of Lou Jacob and a talented quartet of actors.

The main action of the play takes place in a southern U.S. prison, where the men are incarcerated in cramped quarters. Their only time outside the cell comes during exercise breaks and visitations. But when one of the guests turns out to be an inquisitive reporter from *The New York Times*, the truth behind two prisoners' crimes is slowly revealed, shedding light on some questions and throwing others into further shadow.

Graham's premise is pertinent, yet personal, and his examination of the

humanity behind the headlines keeps viewers connected to the characters. Jacob stages the piece beautifully, balancing the tension-filled confrontations with thought-provoking conversations.

The cast members are completely committed to the material, and their dedication pays off handsomely. Tom Stechschulte is a powerful presence in the central role of John Brennen, who may or may not have been guilty of killing a man during a botched drug exchange. Paul Sparks is compelling as his quirky prison companion convicted of mass murder despite his childlike demeanor. Pam Hart brings equal amounts of empathy and authority to her role as the prison guard, and David Letwin is an integral part of the puzzle as the newspaper man who isn't quite so certain of his subject's guilt.

The design components compliment the performance artistry, including Klara Zieglerova's compartmental set, Jeff Nellis' integral lighting design, Marc Gwinn's stark sound work, and Ilona Somogyi's convincing costumes. Technical director Steve Kovacs coordinates the elements together perfectly.

Additional reviews on page 64.

Laughing

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comes to having great material and making me laugh till my ribs ache. You can see him at Cary and Suzanne Hoffman's *Stand-Up New York Comedy Club*, Fri. and Sat., May 5 and 6.

If you can reach Stamford, Conn., be part of the one-night-only audience catching Ellen DeGeneres at the

Stamford Palace Theatre, Sun., May 7, at 7 pm. . . One of my favorite funny songstresses Christine Lavin visits NYC May 7 and May 21, at 7 pm. If you write or sing funny material, you owe yourself a night on the town to see her at the beautiful Firebird Cafe. □

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Katie Fountain

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Minnie Driver

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Michael Unger - Director/ McCarter Theatre

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